

Adjuncts often find ladder leads to nowhere in California community colleges

GIG BY GIG AT CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

BY THOMAS PEELE
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Above: Tobey Kaplan



As many adjuncts have bitterly learned over the years, few bootstrapping dreams come true.

PART 3 OF A THREE PART INVESTIGATION

- Part 1: [The gig workers of California community colleges face worsening conditions](#)
- Part 2: [Health care benefits key battleground for California's adjunct community college faculty](#)

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Adjuncts say the path through community college districts to full-time jobs is steep, perilous and often fruitless. Designed as steppingstones toward a better life for Californians, community colleges often don't give many of those who teach those students their own way ahead.

After working as an adjunct English instructor for about five years at several East Bay districts, Tobey Kaplan, with a master's degree and a growing portfolio of published poems and prose, began applying for tenure-track jobs.

Over the next two decades, she said, she applied at least 20 times for full-time posts. "I believe that I presented myself the way that I should professionally on paper to get an interview. And sometimes I made it to the second round to do a demonstration lesson," she said.

VIDEO

Tobey Kaplan



She kept trying, while continuing to pick up part-time work in the East Bay at the Contra Costa, Peralta, Chabot-Los Positas and Ohlone community college districts, becoming a “freeway flyer” on interstates 80 and 880, loving the work, speaking of it almost as if it were a duty.

“The community college, you know, is so important,” Kaplan said. “It’s a miracle, an opportunity for people who did not feel successful completing high school, or people new to this country, or people going back to school after many years of working in another job and needing to do something else, for so many people to learn together,” she said in an interview at her Oakland home.

But each time she got close to permanent work, the job went to someone else.

“I saw a person from another state or another part of California swoop in and get that full-time job,” she said. “There’s never any guarantee that once you’re in the part-time pool, you’ll be hired full-time.”

About 10 years ago, she stopped applying. “The adjuncts are the have-nots,” she said. “This is a systemic issue. We’re sort of floating on top of the pond scum trying to keep our heads above water.”

That refrain is all too common, said John Martin, chairman of the California Part-time Faculty Association, an advocacy group.



Gig by gig at California Community Colleges [VIDEO]

Adjunct faculty face worsening conditions as enrollment drops and part-time teaching jobs are cut at California's community colleges. Adjuncts, who make up two-thirds of the faculty, are the backbone of the system, which serves about 1.5 million students. Adjuncts work semester by semester, with few or no health benefits and with slim prospects of getting a tenured job. EdSource takes a deeper look at this gig economy in higher education.

Run by 72 semi-autonomous districts that individually hire some 37,000 adjuncts, community colleges collectively have no central tracking of applications. Even if a part-timer is open to a tenure track job anywhere in the state, that means going through the application process over and over.

"It's a lot of work to apply for a full-time position," Martin said. He's a history adjunct at the Butte-Glenn and Shasta college districts and estimated, like Kaplan, he's applied for about 20 full-time jobs during his career.

Martin said he landed "about eight to 10 actual interviews." After not being hired, he'd call back the interviewer, asking questions. Inevitably, he'd learn the position went to someone who already had a full-time job.

In other words, he said, people who start as adjuncts, stay adjuncts. Asked if he thought the average adjunct, with a master's degree, the minimum hiring requirement, or a doctorate, had a chance to climb the academic ladder to a full-time, tenured position, Martin was blunt: "None, zero."



Curly Wikkeling-Miller teaches cosmetology at both the Peralta District in Oakland and the Solano District in Fairfield.

Curly Wikkeling-Miller, a cosmetology adjunct at the Solano and Peralta districts, had the same dream.

“It can be exhausting teaching between two colleges,” she said. “There’s times I wish that I could just focus all of my energy on one campus and be a full-time instructor. I could participate more in campus activities and be of service.”

When a job came open at Peralta’s Laney College, Wikkeling-Miller said, “I just felt that I needed to throw my hat in the ring. I’d been working there, after all, for six years, and I got to the second round of interviews.” But the college chose someone else.

Now, at 64, she said she doesn’t “know that I have the years to put in to become tenured. I think it’s kind of more for a younger person that has their whole career in front of them.”

No state control on hiring

Hiring is a local practice, one where the state has little control. State Community College Chancellor Eloy Oakley declined to be interviewed for this story.

Clearing the obstacles that adjuncts face is “an area that could be reasonably reformed,” said Bill Scroggins, president of the Mt. San Antonio college district in Walnut in Los Angeles County, and the runner-up for the post when Oakley was appointed chancellor in 2016.

“We have done some analysis with an equity lens, and we weren’t happy with what we saw in the screening process,” Scroggins said. “Our applications don’t even ask for evidence that (applicants) can teach. You would get an interview only on what your resume looked like.”

Gig by gig at California community colleges

Rather than a side gig, many adjuncts cobble together part-time work at multiple colleges or in multiple districts. Many don't have health insurance. Often they are hanging on, hoping for a full time job, that never materializes.



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“People were moving forward on interviews and for hire on the basis that they went to a prestigious university or that they had a doctorate rather than a master’s degree,” he said. That “puts adjuncts at a disadvantage for full-time hiring.”

Mt. San Antonio is currently working to make “our hiring process more competency-based and less resume-driven,” Scroggins said. “I expect that the outcome will be that adjunct applicants will be more competitive for full-time positions.”

For those waiting for years to land a tenured position, such changes can’t come fast enough. But Mt. San Antonio is but one piece in a statewide puzzle with widely varying practices.

Linda Sneed, an adjunct English instructor in Sacramento’s Los Rios district and union officer, said she didn’t really know what she was getting herself into when she agreed to be an adjunct there nearly 20 years ago. It was a chance to teach, and she thought it might lead to full-time academia. She took the part-time work after applying for a tenure track job and not getting it. She applied for several other full-time posts that also went nowhere.

Sneed has since become an active union advocate, pushing for change and doing what she can to support her fellow part-timers, especially now as colleges are cutting adjuncts to cope with students driven out by the pandemic and its pressure on students to work to help their families. Recently, she said, she’s had numerous discussions with colleagues about “the precariousness of their employment situation” and the anxiety it causes.

Observing the community college system and its over reliance on adjuncts from the perspective of the part-time ranks, she said, can lead to “feelings of self-doubt” and inferiority.

She finds herself questioning that the system “is all a meritocracy” where full-timers “deserve to be hired as full-time and there’s something wrong with the rest of us.”



Paul Baltimore

The pandemic has made a difficult situation worse. A former adjunct colleague of Sneed's took his life last year. Paul Baltimore taught history and was active in the Faculty Association of the California Community Colleges and the local Los Rios union.

In 2018, Baltimore, then a part-time American history professor in the Los Rios District, was featured in a Sacramento Magazine story titled "Making a Makeshift Living."

He was blunt about his frustration at being unable to land a full-time job despite having a doctorate from UC Santa Barbara and a reputation as a strong and engaging teacher.

"I'm at a point where a lot of part-timers get. It's a grueling process to go through the whole interview process and not get it," he told the writer Catherine Warmerdam. "There's no direct path to a full-time job. I'm hunkered down as a part-timer. The idea now that you can get a full-time job is like a remote dream. I think lawmakers need to be vigilant about the exploitation that this is creating."

Sneed called Baltimore "my best friend."

"For someone with a PhD in history, he was very humble and easy to talk to," she said "He was someone who had an enormous, really powerful brain who never used that brain to make anybody else feel lesser than."

He was popular too, with students.

"Great Professor! Gives great feedback and is always willing to sit down with you to explain paper comments. Be ready to college up, that means citing sources and using critical thinking skills," one student wrote on the website Rate My Professor. If there was one complaint students had about him, it was that he assigned a lot of reading.

"He wasn't dull at all. He was very, very, funny," Dianne Childs, a student of Baltimore's, told EdSource. "He was extremely focused on context – why did events happen and how cultures fit together."

Baltimore had applied for a couple of open positions in Los Rios, been a finalist and had not been hired, Sneed said. "These opportunities even to apply don't come up that often. He kind of cobbled together the equivalent of a full-time position for a part-timer across the colleges in our district, he usually managed to get three classes."

As the pandemic proved unrelenting, Baltimore's mother, Pat Baltimore said she noticed a strain on him, shortly after moving from Philadelphia in 2018 to be near him. He was worried about keeping up his teaching load and making enough money to support himself. He missed the classroom, and was worried that remote teaching robbed him of interaction with students. She said he was concerned he was not an effective online instructor and that that might cost him work.

On April 7, she said, he got an email offering him two classes in the fall 2021 semester. To Pat Baltimore, "This was cause for celebration." She cooked him a special dinner that night. But Paul was unhappy, she said.

"He told her, 'Two classes are barely enough to keep me going financially. I have bills to pay,'" she said. "Three got him to a point where he could maybe get close to breaking even." In past semesters Baltimore was paid between \$12,000 to \$15,000 per semester, records show. He was also paid for office hours but, like his colleagues, what he was paid for teaching the course covers all of his time including preparation and grading. Adjuncts are typically paid per hour for teaching time which varies widely across the districts.

Pat Baltimore later learned her son had been paying the rent for his Sacramento apartment using his credit card.

"I believe he gave up," she said, "And then he was gone."

Paul Baltimore left no note. The Sacramento County Coroner's Office found no foul play, ruling his death a suicide, according to its report on the matter.

In a statement, Los Rios spokesperson Gabe Ross said the entire district was "deeply saddened by Paul's tragic death. Paul was a valued member of the Los Rios family, having taught at three of our colleges, and his loss is still being felt by his colleagues and students. His passing was yet another crushing reminder about the impacts of the pandemic on mental health issues in every walk of life."

Baltimore's colleagues and family are working to ensure he is not forgotten.

In April, the Faculty Association of the California Community Colleges will posthumously give Baltimore its Jonathan Lightman FACCCTivist Award, named for its former executive director, for his "advocacy on behalf of part-time faculty continues to have an impact today within FACCC and in the halls of the State Capitol," Executive Director Evan Hawkins, said in a statement.

Pat Baltimore now is in the process of creating a nonprofit organization called the Dr. Paul Reed Baltimore Memorial Fund. "Paul's Peeps," as she calls it to honor her son's friends who have been supporting her, will be dedicated to helping adjuncts undergoing financial difficulties. Her plan is to concentrate on California, first, and perhaps evolve it into a national organization if it receives enough support.

She will start by offering adjuncts help with living expenses.

"The whole purpose of what I'm putting together, and I will be successful at this, is to provide assistance to part-timers when they're experiencing financial distress, to help with rent and food insecurities," she said.

And she's talking with her son's friends like Sneed about how to create a larger support network and community for adjuncts, one where they can discuss the constant stress of their gig-work careers and share what they have learned about surviving.

Adjuncts, she said, a slight sigh audible over the phone from Philadelphia, face “so many inequities.”

She hopes to have a formal launch in April on what would have been her son’s 51st birthday.

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(Information on Paul’s Peeps can be obtained by emailing Patricia Baltimore at pattib6349@gmail.com)

Daniel J. Willis, EdSource data journalist contributed to this investigation, and Andrew Reed, EdSource staffer, contributed to this story.

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